The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
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DEAR MEMBER,

The pact between the Axis Powers and Japan underlines the fact that the nations of the world are lining up behind two conflicting conceptions of life. The one is that power alone counts and that all questions must be settled by the might of the stronger. The other doctrine is that to treat human life as a sheer struggle for power is to revert to the law of the jungle; that, on the contrary, man's life becomes humane and civilised in proportion as he attempts to establish the relations between individuals, groups and peoples on a basis of justice, law, toleration and mutual respect. We must avoid over-simplifying the issues. It would be a mistake to suppose that there is no truth in the standpoint and claims of our opponents, or that society among ourselves is a shining example of the principles for which we are contending. But substantially the two doctrines of life I have mentioned are at stake in the conflict, and it is that fact alone which gives meaning to the present suffering and makes it endurable.

If this is the truth of the matter, it is all the more essential that we should give reality and substance to the things for which we stand. If our cause is right, it will succeed by being in the fullest degree what it claims to be. It is to that point that our energies need to be directed.

THE INDIAN SITUATION

The problem of India is too vast and complex either to state in brief compass or to dogmatise about. All that can be done in the News-Letter is to suggest one or two aspects which should be of special concern to those who approach the problem from the Christian angle.

Let me, to begin with, commend as a guide to an understanding of the issues a small volume that has just appeared—*Enlist India for Freedom,* by Edward Thompson (Gollancz, 2s. 6d.). The writer really knows the subject and has had close contacts with both sides, he has a gift of admirably clear presentation and, whether one agrees with his conclusions or not, he is plainly trying to give a just and balanced view.

There are in the whole of history few events to match in dramatic interest the encounter between the British Government and Mr. Gandhi, behind whom is rallied a large part of India. A nation conspicuous for its political talent and the builder of the most impressive political structure that the world has known finds itself confronted by an otherworldly seer and mystic guided by inflexible religious convictions. In this strange confrontation there is on each side a measure of understanding, respect and even admiration for the other. Hitler or Mussolini would sweep Gandhi unrelentingly from their path; the British Government will do all that it can to avert a conflict, not merely for reasons of political expediency but because some part at least of the British mind recognises in the Indian opposition moral qualities which it cannot but respect. Mr. Gandhi on his side is never tired of asserting his love for the British nation and declaring that he does not wish to see it defeated or humiliated. That this underlying mutual understanding and appreciation still exists is a basic element of hope in the situation.

The fundamental Indian demands are two. First, in regard to the war, the fact that India was committed to the war without the consent of the Indian people, and without even formal consultation with the central and provincial legislatures, is almost universally felt as a deep humiliation. Mr. Thompson shows that on this matter there is a unanimity of feeling reaching far beyond Congress. It is not a sufficient answer that *constitutionally* foreign policy, including, of course, the declaration of war, is a subject reserved in the hands of the Viceroy. Legal right carries no conviction to those whose feelings of moral right have been outraged. No issue affects so deeply the life and well-being of a people as involvement in war. In this issue, more than any other, a people, once it has attained political self-consciousness, wants to determine its own fate. India has seen South Africa hesitate, Eire remain neutral. It has seen Egypt, Iraq and other small States decide for themselves their attitude to the war. Why should India, far outranking them in numbers and proud of its great traditions, have to submit to its destiny being determined by others? The bitterness is not lessened by the fact that large sections of Indian opinion are in favour of India taking its part in the war and that the sympathies of the whole country are with Britain against the Axis Powers.

The question is complicated by the depth and strength of Mr. Gandhi's pacifist convictions. These are not shared by all members of the Congress party. But the recent choice of Mr. Gandhi as leader means that the party is behind the line he takes in this matter. Pacifism is always a difficult problem for a Government and nation at war, since it thwarts the national purpose. This is not the place to discuss the treatment of pacifist opinion by a nation at war. But it is plain that the problem becomes more acute and takes on a new character when pacifist conviction is combined with national feeling. It is one thing for a Government to take (rightly or wrongly) a particular line with a pacifist minority of its own citizens. A quite different and more difficult problem arises when the religious and moral objection to war is mixed up with a challenge to the right of the Government to decide in the matter at all.

The second fundamental Indian demand is that the political future of India should be determined by the people of India themselves. In this matter there is a basal Christian principle involved which, though it does not give practical guidance regarding the precise way of dealing with a very intricate problem, ought to influence profoundly our attitude and approach to it. It is the principle of respect for human freedom. God has given man free will. The meaning of this terrible gift is that individuals and nations are free, if they choose, to go to hell, whether that hell be an earthly or a future one. To deny this God-given freedom to those who are mature is to get into greater difficulties than to concede it.

I am speaking now not of political declarations, the terms and phrases of which may be twisted to serve political ends, but of the fundamental attitude of those who deal with the matter from the British side. I would wish that attitude to be one of saying in effect to India, as we have in fact under force of circumstances, said to Eire, "We unreservedly accept the principle that you are entitled to determine your own destiny, whatever the consequences to yourselves or to the British Empire." I would go further in this matter than Mr. Thompson, who would offer India Dominion Status, but not independence. I believe this country should be ready, not to make India an offer of independence, because such a phrase has no meaning till a host of particulars have been discussed, but to make it plain that it interposes no absolute bar to independence. To tell a man there is something he can't have has the effect of making him think all the more that he wants it. It is a psychological blunder. The choice of independence rather than partnership in the British Commonwealth would seem to me fatal to the well-being of India; but I believe also that Indians can be trusted to see this as clearly as ourselves.

The first step is to place the responsibility fairly and squarely on Indian shoulders and to convince them of the sincerity of our intentions in this matter. Then we can rightly say, as the Government now says, that if Great Britain is to meet Indian demands and transfer

its present responsibilities there must be substantial agreement among Indians in regard to these demands. This is an entirely just position; its weakness up to the present is that we have not overcome Indian distrust of our intentions. If doubt on that score can be removed, we can disinterestedly insist that Indians should tackle themselves the real difficulties of the Indian situation.

These difficulties are greater than the leaders of the Indian Congress are willing to admit and than many British sympathisers with Indian freedom recognise. I am not sure that Mr. Thompson quite does justice either to the fundamental unwillingness of the Moslem population to have imposed on them a Hindu way of life, and their fear that this would result from granting the demands of Congress or to the repercussions of any action the Government of India may take on Moslem feeling in the Middle East and Africa. These repercussions no Government involved in a world war can ignore.

But immense as the difficulties are, it would be a disaster to make that an excuse for leaving things alone. The failure last week of the Viceroy and Mr. Gandhi to reach agreement is a fateful event that may conceivably determine to a large extent the issues of the war. The relatively slight prominence given to it in the British Press as a whole is an illustration of the traditional lack of interest in, and understanding of, the Indian problem on the part of both people and politicians in this country, which has been a chief hindrance to the establishment of right relations between India and ourselves. The course which the war is taking makes a solution more urgent than ever. If two conceptions of life are in conflict, it is of the utmost importance that the immense aggregations of human beings which make up India and China should be won, as they are predisposed to be won, for the cause which we believe to be right. If this can be brought about the effects on the future of mankind would transcend anything that our minds can now conceive.

The fundamental shortcoming in our relations with India has been want of imagination. It is a happy chance that the offices of Prime Minister and Secretary of State for India should be filled just now by men who are not lacking in this quality. Let us remember them in our prayers.

RETALIATION

There has been an extensive correspondence in *The Times* on the subject of reprisals, which is interesting as shedding light on the mind of some of the writers. A number of the letters take substantially the same view as was expressed last week in the News-Letter. These include several from soldiers deprecating indiscriminate bombing, and a powerful plea by Bishop Hensley Henson that "the state of the world would be hopeless indeed if, when at last the war ends, there shall be left no witness among the belligerents of those higher standards of human intercourse, the preservation of which alone made the hideous calamity of the war worth while."

An indication of a widely prevalent state of mind is given by one correspondent who says, "Among my many friends and acquaintances I have not met one who does not advocate retaliation. In my experience everybody is longing for it." There is every reason for those of us who disagree to be up and doing.

The most significant thing in the correspondence is the tacit assumption that the question is purely one of human arrangements, conventions or sentiment, so that if one side breaks the rules the other is morally free to do the same. There is no inkling that there may be a law of *God*, which may not be violated in any circumstances.

Admittedly the line is difficult to draw in modern total war. Munitions workers, both men and women, are certainly combatants. The auxiliary defence services and industries manufacturing for export are contributory to the military effort. But children are not combatants, nor the aged and infirm, nor many engaged in peaceful, civil occupations. Since we are all bound together in inescapable solidarity, children and other innocent persons cannot escape

the sufferings of war. But the vital difference emerges when there is *deliberate* attack on the unarmed and innocent for the purpose of creating terror.

Christians can take part in war only if the distinction can be maintained between war (as the sole means in certain circumstances of restraining aggression) and murder. The deliberate killing of non-combatants is murder. If war degenerates into wilful slaughter of the innocent, Christians must either become pacifists or give up their religion. It would be a grave injustice to our airmen to ask them to sear their souls by machine-gunning non-combatants (in the sense in which I have used the term) or in dropping bombs for the purpose not of weakening the military effectiveness of the enemy but of creating the maximum terror. The correspondence includes a letter from an airman making this plea. We have to fight this war not for victory alone but to establish the reign of justice and mercy and to deliver the helpless and oppressed throughout the world. If our aim is to rid the world of a foul tyranny, the innocent in Germany are the objects not of our enmity, but of our solicitude and care.

Vastly more is at stake in this issue than is generally realised. Man's moral advance depends on his capacity to say an absolute "No." His progress in civilisation has been due to his recognising certain things as sacred and inviolable, and regarding certain acts as *unconditionally* wrong. If he ceases to acknowledge an inviolable moral law, he must sink to a sub-human level. It is because western society has forgotten this absoluteness of the moral law that we have been brought to the present pass. We shall lose all that we believe we are fighting for, unless in face of the strongest temptation we hold fast to that Law, in the fulfilment of which man finds his true life.

THE COUNTY BADGE

I have had a number of letters taking me severely to task for having taken no account of girls in the Supplement on "Youth, the War and the Future." All my life I have regarded the education of girls as every whit as important as that of boys. But in this short and highly compressed statement there was not room to deal with all important aspects of the subject, and my immediate purpose was, first, to get the *idea* of the County Badge movement understood, and, secondly, to concentrate attention on the crucial question how a big move on behalf of youth can be brought about in war-time. Opportunities continually slip from us because a desire to get everything right and nicely rounded out keeps us from seizing the crucial moment in the faith that if we achieve a break-through all else will follow in due course. If a national movement is launched, it is essential that the needs of girls should receive the same attention as those of boys. But advance in the one field will help the other. I often recall a saying of Dr. Thomas Chalmers, the famous Scottish divine, that "Christianity is a principle which works not by exclusion but by *fermentation*." The same is true of education.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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